Eulogy at Wounded Knee

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In May 1992, Rabbi Marc Angel was among a group that spent five days in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. The visit brought the group together with descendants of the Sioux sage, Black Elk. The culmination of this intensive week was a memorial gathering at the cemetery in Wounded Knee, the resting place of victims of a horrific massacre of Sioux Indians in 1890, when Black Elk was still a child. Rabbi Angel delivered this eulogy at Wounded Knee.

We stand at the mass grave of men, women and children—
Indians who were massacred at Wounded Knee in the
bitter winter of 1890. Pondering the tragedy that
occurred at Wounded Knee fills the heart with crying and with silence.

The great Sioux holy man, Black Elk, was still a child when he saw the dead bodies of his people strewn throughout this area. As an old man, he reflected on what he had seen: “I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream. For the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.”

Indeed, the massacre at Wounded Knee was the culmination of decades of destruction and transformation for the American Indian. The decades of suffering somehow are encapsulated and symbolized by the tragedy at Wounded Knee. Well-armed American soldiers slaughtered freezing, almost defenseless, Indians—including women and children. Many of the soldiers were awarded medals of honor for their heroism, as

if there could be any heroism in wiping out helpless people.

How did this tragedy happen? How was it possible for the soldiers—who no doubt thought of themselves as good men—to participate in a deed of such savagery? How was it possible that the United States government awarded medals of honor to so many of the soldiers?

The answer is found in one word: dehumanization. For the Americans, the Indians were not people at all, only wild savages. It was no different killing Indians than killing buffaloes or wild dogs. If an American general taught that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian,” it means that he did not view Indians as human beings.

When you look a person in the eye and see him as a person, you simply can’t kill him or hurt him. Human sympathy and compassion will be aroused. Doesn’t he have feelings like you? Doesn’t he love, fear, cry, laugh? Doesn’t he want to protect his loved ones?

The tragedy of Wounded Knee is a tragedy of the American Indians. But it is also more than that. It is a profound tragedy of humanity. It is the tragedy of dehumanization. It is the tragedy that recurs again and again, and that is still with us today. Isn’t our society still riddled with hatred, where groups are hated because of their religion, race, national origin?

Don’t we still experience the pervasive depersonalization process where people are made into objects, robbed of their essential human dignity?

When Black Elk spoke, he lamented the broken hoop of his nation. The hoop was the symbol of wholeness, togetherness, harmony. Black Elk cried that the hoop of his nation had been broken at Wounded Knee.

But we might also add that the hoop of American life was also broken by the hatred and prejudice exemplified by Wounded Knee. And the hoop of our nation continues to be torn apart by the hatred that festers in our society.

Our task, the task of every American, is to do our share to mend the hoop, to repair the breaches.

The poet Stephen Vincent Benet, in his profound empathy, wrote: “Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.” This phrase reflects the pathos of this place and the tragedy of this place.

But if we are to be faithful to Black Elk’s vision, we must add: Revitalize our hearts at Wounded Knee. Awaken our hearts to the depths of this human tragedy. Let us devote our revitalized hearts toward mending the hoop of America, the hoop of all humanity That hoop is made of love; that hoop depends on respect for each other, for human dignity.

We cry at this mass grave at Wounded Knee. We cry for the victims. We cry for the recurrent pattern of hatred and dehumanization that continues to separate people, that continues to foster hatred and violence and murder.

Let us put the hoop of our nation back in order. For the sake of those who have suffered and for the sake of those who are suffering, let us put the hoop of our nation back in order.